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Sara J. Ruto / John K. Mugo

Free Primary Education in Kenya

The elusive EFA dream – about to be reached?

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Beitrag informiert über die Anstrengungen zur Erreichung von Bildung für alle im unabhängigen Kenia. Universale Grundbildung ist bisher für jede Regierung eine Herausforderung gewesen und die Ankündigungen kostenloser Grundbildung haben zu umfassenden Einschulungen geführt, die aber keine nachhaltige Wirkung hatten. Bildung für Alle ist nicht gleichbedeutend mit kostenloser Schule. Um das Ziel von Education for All in Kenia zu erreichen, müssen auch die Relevanz der Inhalte, die Qualität des gesamten Prozesses und Zuganges für die nomadischen Völker und andere marginalisierten Gruppen betrachtet werden. Auch sind kritische Überlegungen über die finanzielle Nachhaltigkeit notwendig, damit nicht auch der auch der aktuelle Versuch ‚universaler Bildung' scheitert.

Abstract: This article provides a brief examination of the attempts to access basic education to all the citizenry in independent Kenya. UPE has been a long term preoccupation for successive governments which have often made public pronouncements on "free education" that have resulted in massive enrolments. These enrolments have however not been sustained. The article addresses some reasons why previous UPE drives failed and argues that more attention needs to be paid to critical issues of relevance, quality, school type especially for nomadic communities, reaching vulnerable children and sustaining basic education provision from within, otherwise the current free primary education will result in yet another elusive attempt to achieve UPE.

Short history of Education For All in Kenya since 1960s

The high social demand for basic education has been a consistent feature since Kenya's independence in 1963. The instrumental value of education as the key to better livelihoods by the Kenyans has been echoed by the state, proclaiming education as the means to economic development. So deep is this conviction in formal education that all the three governments[1] have made attempts to universalise education. *So to say, achieving Education For All has been a long time hope in Kenya.*

The first such attempt was evident soon after independence, when the ruling party KANU (Kenya African National Union) promised free Universal Primary Education (UPE) in its election manifesto. The Ominde commission was formed in 1964 and mandated to advice the government on the formulation and implementation of national education policy. This commission recommended that UPE implementation start in 1965 and is completed by 1971. However, due to both economic challenges and inadequacy of political commitment, this plan was not attained. Though the government bore the bulk of expenditures in higher education during this decade (Otieno 2003), parents continued to bear the burden of most direct costs in primary education.

In the 1970s, the free primary education (FPE) promise seems to have taken the form of presidential decrees. In 1971, a presidential decree abolished tuition fees in arid and semi arid lands (ASAL), followed by a second decree in 1973, which extended non-payment of fees for pupils in grades 1 – 4 countrywide. In 1978 another presidential decree outlawed the payment of fees in the whole primary school level. Each of the latter two pronouncements resulted in an estimated one million more children in school; numbers that neither education planners nor schools had expected to cater for within such short notice. This mass inflow of children into the schools led to overcrowded classrooms, outstretched learning resources, overworked and often under-trained teachers; factors which undermined the quality of education. The impact of the 1973 and 1978 decrees on the ASAL areas[2] was insignificant as no attempt was made to address the more critical issues limiting access to education such as distance to school and relevance of content to the lives of the people. The kind of initiatives that would match the nomadic lifestyles of these communities such as mobile schools remained invisible. Given that these political statements came without adequate planning, schools could soon not sustain the huge number of pupils. Indirect charges were eventually reintroduced leading to further dropout. Arguably, it is the implementation of the cost sharing policy in 1988 though, which truly marginalized the poor in terms of access to education. The magnitudes of out-of-school children continued to rise especially during the 1990s matching poverty trends. By mid 2002, it was estimated that there were about 3.5 million children out of school.

Yet again, the "Kibaki" government revisited 1973/1978 scenes and reintroduced FPE in January 2003. Similar to former attempts, no consultation with education and economic planners is evident. Otieno (2003) however argues that there are certain salient differences in favour of the current pledge. First, schools have been allocated with specific amounts of funds based on pupil enrolment (Kenya shillings – KSH –

1,020 per annum; 104 KSH = 1 EUR), meaning that certain scholastic materials per child can be purchased. Secondly, the donor community has been very supportive and injected huge sums of money in FPE. Lastly, there seems to be real political will to make this the final call to universalise primary education in Kenya. According to the plans, universal primary education (UPE) should be attained by this year, 2005. The question then is, will the current FPE strategy finally lead Kenya to the elusive UPE goal by end of this year?

Strengths of the free primary education programme (2003)

The opening of the primary school doors witnessed a 17.6% increment in enrolment, from 6,131,000 in 2002 to 7,208,100 in 2003 (CBS 2004, p.33). Secondly, the programme won overwhelming enthusiasm from the donor community and the private sector. For example, the World Bank gave a grant of 3.7 billion shillings in June 2003, while the British government through the Department for International Development (DFID) had earlier given a grant of 1.6 billion shillings to boost the programme. Other donors include the Organisation of Oil Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) of 1.2 billion, the government of Sweden (430 million) and UNICEF (250 million) (Aduda 2003). Lessons from history however indicate that donor-dependent programmes are not sustainable. What would happen, if the current donors withdrew their funding?

Another strength of the FPE programme is its effort to reach out to out-of-school children. Some non-formal schools (so far about 50) targeting school-aged children are now being funded, though informally. This attempt to reach out to all children is commendable, since not all can be accommodated in the formal school. However, there is need for formalisation of the funding for these schools. So far, only non-formal schools that offer the national grade 8 examinations are being funded, questioning the role of these schools within the national education policy.

Besides, other strengths of this programme include its keenness on monitoring and evaluation[3], fundraising from various sources[4] and community assurance systems, whereby strategic people in the villages (mainly from the provincial administration) carry out house-to-house campaigns, indicating community ownership of the programme.

Challenges to the programme

After introducing the programme in January 2003, an immediate challenge was the large numbers of children in the classrooms[5], a condition that led to problematic classroom management and teacher fatigue. Practices that could counter large classrooms like multi-shift have not been implemented and yet efforts to hire more teachers are limited by funds. The average national pupil-teacher ratio worsened from 34:1 to 40:1 on introduction of FPE (CBS 2004, p.30). This fact, coupled with insufficient learning resources, has greatly comprised quality of education in the public schools.

Secondly, there has been a problem of slow movement of funds. For example, money that should have been disbursed in January 2004 reached the schools in June. This adversely affected the school operations given that this is the only money available to the schools. Besides, the cost of education especially in urban areas is much higher than the provided 1,020 shillings per child per year. Some schools used to have a budget of as high as 3,000 shillings per child. The only solution left is to introduce indirect charges to cover for the difference, or sit helpless and watch standards deteriorate.

Parallel to this is the challenge of attitude among the parents. The notion that education is free has led to negligence of responsibility affecting especially early childhood education, which was left out by the FPE programme. The schools have to handle children who are brought directly to the first grade, without having passed through any Kindergarten or nursery school.

Currently, many of the children who had rejoined school in January 2003 have dropped out. Most of these have dropped out either to work to complement the family's income, or to take care of their siblings or sick parents. Other dropouts consist of the hard-to-reach children like truants and delinquent children, children living and/or working on the streets as well as abused and neglected children, whose special learning needs cannot be addressed in the 'crowded' school. Other challenges to the FPE programme include poverty, unemployment, HIV/AIDS[6], low transition to secondary school[7], low value of education among the low class and inadequate educational planning and implementation/ management capacity (GOK/UNICEF 2004, p.18).

Critical issues and perspectives towards EFA

As a result of the wanting quality of education in primary schools, those who can afford have withdrawn their children from the crowded schools and enrolled them in private schools. The implication is that these children have higher chances of progressing to the best secondary schools and the university. Similarly, those children of poor socio-economic backgrounds who had moved from non-formal schools to the "free" public

formal school are returning back, in search of a more homely environment, to access feeding programmes and lower costs as the head teacher of St Johns Community Centre (Nairobi) observes:

"Before FPE we had 550 children but after FPE most of them left. After one year they came back because it was not what they had expected…for children to access education we need to address some issues. The problem is just the same regardless of the type of school. In fact free is not free. Free is expensive. School is free, desk is 2,000 shillings, you need uniform, food is needed so schooling is expensive" (quoted in Ruto, 2004).

This means that the programme has failed to minimize the disparity in access to quality education between the rich and the poor. Indeed, the strategy is entrenching the poor further, and this is a concern that must be addressed. For the poor to really benefit, quality in public primary schools must now be a priority.

In addition to this, there must be specific measures to reach certain categories of children for the UPE goal to be attained. These include foremost child labourers[8], child domestic workers and children of nomadic communities.[9] A recent study on child domestic workers in Nairobi and Garissa established that none of them had the opportunity to attend a formal school. A few of them went to NFE centres. However, almost all the children aspired to go to school and this should be facilitated through flexible, accommodative educational programmes and enforcement of children rights (Ruto 2004).

Lastly, given that the donor is likely to get exhausted, there is need for high-level planning. To start with, this must entail abandoning the populist, political paradigm in favour of a more pragmatic scheme. Instead of "giving out" the little available resources to the rich and poor alike, the same resources could be utilized more effectively to address the identified blockades against EFA. It is a fact that some schools, for example in some areas of Nairobi (Westlands and the like) can afford to cater for themselves and can make do without the 1,020 shillings per year. In return, these little resources can be directed to the poor socio-economic urban and rural milieu, as well as to the hard-to-rich children and those who cannot be accommodated in the mainstream, say for example orphans, delinquents, children of nomadic communities and those with disabilities. Alongside this, the "free" education must also become compulsory, to be able to accord it its position as a right of the child in the Kenyan society.

Such are the realities that the Kenyan government has to face, if EFA is to be realized by 2015.

Annotations

1 Kenya has had only three presidents since 1963, Kenyatta (1963-78), Moi (1978-2002) and Kibaki (since December 2002).

2 Most parts of Northern and North Eastern Kenya are either arid or semi arid and these areas record the lowest enrolment and completion rates.

3 Funds have been set aside for monitoring FPE. That the monitoring seems to be effective is indicated by a number of newspaper reports where head teachers who misappropriated FPE money have been interdicted.

4 There is a media relations, public communication and advocacy sub group, established based on the recommendations of the 2003 Task Force on FPE which has published a pamphlet (MOEST 2003) disseminating information on FPE and soliciting for more support from other sectors.

5 A visit to four schools in Nairobi in May 2004 recorded up to 80 children in one classroom with one teacher, especially those schools serving poor urban settlements.

6 Due to the disease, schools are losing teachers without any replacement, while the total number orphans (aged between 0-14 years) is estimated at 1.7 million, 12% of all Kenyan children (Ministry of Home Affairs 2004, p.11).

7 While the primary school is free, the secondary school is still too costly for the poor. This means that children completing primary school (8 years) from poor socio-economic backgrounds cannot continue to the secondary school.

8 There are around 2 million working children, the majority of whom work on family farms (Ministry of Home Affairs 2004, p.6).

9 There is worrying regional disparity in school enrolment especially attributable to nomadic lifestyles. While the highest gross enrolment ratio (GER) in 2003 was recorded in Western province (108.4, with 107.1 girls), North Eastern province had only 15.9 (girls 11).

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Dr. Sara Jerop Ruto, born in 1967, holds a Dr. phil. from the University of Heidelberg; teaches History of Education and Comparative Education at Kenyatta University, Nairobi; research and publications on disadvantaged children, focussing on child domestic workers (invariably children); currently coordinator of a research-group on integration of community knowledge into the school curriculum in rural Kenya.

Dr. John Mugo, born 1974 in Kenya, holds a Dr. phil. From University of Hannover; working in a project of Development Cooperation for children in Nairobi; lecturer at Dept. of Education at Kenyatta University, Nairobi; main fields of scientific interest: street-children, music, theatre